

# 40th anniversary of Americans in orbit

On Feb. 24, the four remaining members of the Mercury Seven Astronauts were honored in a daylong celebration at Kennedy Space Center to recognize the 40th anniversary of Americans in orbit. On-hand for the day's events were John Glenn, Scott Carpenter, Wally Schirra and Gordon Cooper – the ones responsible for the first U.S. orbital flights.

The celebration began with a press conference that included media from around the globe. The four then participated in a dedication ceremony to open the newly renovated Rocket Garden at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex.

One of the rockets featured in the rocket garden is the Mercury Atlas, the same rocket that Glenn, Carpenter, Schirra and Cooper rode into space.

The day ended with a special event entitled "An Evening with the Mercury Astronauts." Held in the expansive Apollo/Saturn V Center under a 363-foot Saturn V moon rocket, Astronaut Jim Lovell served as the host for the evening.

The four men reminisced about their ground-breaking flights and life as one of the Mercury Seven Astronauts. The evening also featured an appearance by the comedian known as the Eighth Mercury Astronaut, Bill Dana.

**Roundup editor Melissa Davis** attended the events. Below, she provides a snapshot of that special day.



At left are the Mercury Seven Astronauts: Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Virgil 'Gus' Grissom, Walter Schirra, Alan Shepard and Donald 'Deke' Slayton. Above are the remaining members of the original seven: Cooper, Schirra, Carpenter and Glenn.

## 'We're not a bunch of guys, we're a bunch of brothers'

The applause was as spontaneous as it was surprising.

These days it's rare for the media to give such respect to the subjects of a press conference. However, emotions just took over when the four remaining Mercury Seven Astronauts walked into the room.

To say they still have the right stuff would be cliché. It would also be true. While the world has changed significantly since these men captured the headlines, their appeal is timeless.

Wally Schirra is still comedic.

John Glenn is still stately.

Scott Carpenter is still dashing.

And Gordon Cooper is, well, still Gordo.

"It's been 40 years now and it seems

like about 40 days," Glenn told the reporters from around the globe.

The four still know how to charm the press, which isn't known for its soft side. The men were showered with compliments. One reporter even stood and told the four he didn't have a question – all he wanted to say is that they are still American heroes.

He wasn't the only one who thought so. More than a thousand people showed up that day to catch a glimpse of the space pioneers.

Many astronauts and dignitaries attended at the evening's event – people who normally steal the spotlight.

However, this was a night reserved for four men who captured America's heart during the tense space-race era.

In the age of Space Shuttles and the International Space Station, it was fun to travel back in time to the beginning of America's storied space program.

"Project Mercury was just the start of where we're going to go in the future," Glenn said.

While they are proud of their past, the four still look forward. "Each flight, as it moves up, is the greatest flight because that's the one that's the cutting edge at the time," Glenn said. "That's the one that takes it just a little bit further."

True to their reputation, the day's events were filled with numerous wisecracks:

### Schirra on NASA launching chimpanzees before humans

"The ASPCA kept sending us letters about the cruelty to animals, so we launched Al Shepard."

### Cooper on Glenn's return to space in 1997

"I just want to say to John, that when I'm old I want to go to Mars."

### Glenn on his return to space

"It's not true that I'm the only man to leave Florida in something other than a Winnebago."

### Carpenter on speaking after Glenn

"I forgot how hard it is to follow John."

However, the gathering of these legends was just as sentimental as it was entertaining. The four made it known they are not complete without their deceased Mercury Seven brothers – Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Alan Shepard and Donald "Deke" Slayton.

Schirra got choked up when he spoke of missing them, and Glenn said, "Three people are not here with us now who were a very key part of this whole thing – Alan, Gus and Deke – and you can't help but think about them."

Only those seven know what they went through – physically and mentally. They were guinea pigs as much as they were heroes. They risked their lives during a primitive time in the space program to lay the groundwork for all that has followed their historic flights.

That is why a bond exists with the remaining four that can never be broken.

"We have the privilege of loving each other and teaching each other," Schirra said.

Carpenter agreed. "We have a camaraderie that is indestructible."

He added, "It is an honor to be a part of this group, dwindling as it may be. It is a great pleasure to be associated with you three guys."

Cooper echoed the same sentiments.

"We're not just a bunch of guys, we're a bunch of brothers. I love you guys." ♦



When asked by a reporter if any of them still would like to go to space, the remaining Mercury Seven Astronauts gave an overwhelming response.